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Increasing Voter Engagement Among Low-Income Young Adults Part One: Overview of Obstacles and Possible Strategies for Change

Produced by:

The National Council of Young Leaders – *Opportunity Youth United*; December, 2015

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Focus groups with Low-Income young adults from 17 states in 2015

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Background

The ***National Council of Young Leaders*** was formed in 2012 by YouthBuild USA in collaboration with several other national organizations to organize a national leadership council of current or former “opportunity youth,” defined as young people who had been raised in poverty and had at one point or another spent time out of school and unemployed. The term “opportunity youth” is a shift from the traditionally negative terms used to refer to this population, such as “at-risk”, “disconnected”, or “drop-out” youth. We applaud the use of the term opportunity youth both because our peers are seeking opportunity and because they offer society an opportunity if only society would invest in their development.

The organizations which sponsor the Council have expanded to include Be the Change, College Advising Corps, Gateway to College National Network, Mikva Challenge, National Congress of American Indians, National Guard Youth Foundation, Partners for Education at Berea College, Philadelphia Youth Network, Public Allies, The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, The Corps Network, Year Up, and YouthBuild USA. The Council has produced and disseminated our ***Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America*** and has organized and mobilized a grassroots movement of present and former opportunity youth and our allies. This movement is called **Opportunity Youth United (OYU)**.

The purpose of **Opportunity Youth United (OYU)** is to engage a broad constituency while simultaneously raising up youth voices and promoting solutions designed to increase opportunity and decrease poverty in America. OYU was established to address the economic and social issues that have resulted in 5.5 million opportunity youth being unemployed and out of school, roughly half of whom grew up in poverty. OYU aims to both generate the political will to invest in pathways out of poverty for all young people, and to change the conditions of poverty that cause so much suffering for the residents of our communities.

Introduction

As former opportunity youth who were born into poverty through no fault of our own, we at the National Council of Young Leaders (the Council) have had the good fortune of accessing excellent programmatic and policy interventions that have enabled us, and many of our peers, to reclaim a productive contributing lifestyle. We believe that it is a sin and a shame that our society is currently wasting the talents of millions of young adults, like ourselves, who are needed as a positive force in our local communities, the economy, and in the body politic.

One of the ways we intend to build the political will to make this important investment is by engaging opportunity youth in the electoral process, through voter registration, through voter education, through voter mobilization, and through inspiring young leaders, who have experienced poverty and a civil and social detachment, to run for public office in their local communities and beyond. This white paper is one step in that process. Here, we use our greatest strength, tremendous access to youth organizations and opportunity youth, to outline obstacles that opportunity youth have identified throughout their participation in the electoral process. Additionally, we have compiled a set of action steps put forth by these same opportunity youth to address the issues raised.

Method

During the fall of 2015 the National Council of Young Leaders consulted with 45 opportunity youth, who are leaders in their respective low-income communities, and who originate from 17 states (AL, AR, CA, CN, GA, IL, KY, LA, MA, MD, NJ, NM, NY, OH, OR, PA, TN) in a series of meetings to learn what they saw as the obstacles, resistance, and solutions to generating robust civic and voter engagement among low-income young adults.

After holding these meetings we reviewed the literature on the subject of civic engagement for low-income young adults, especially research focused on those not in college or on a path to college, to compare our experiential insights with the research and conventional wisdom. We found there to be an inadequate focus on, and a gap in the knowledge of, opportunity youth. What we have put forth below is fairly consistent with the research that does exist.

We hope that this paper will add the much needed dimension of youth voice to the research, the conversation surrounding youth voter engagement, and to the solutions that are urgently in need of funding and implementation.

Causes, Obstacles, and Resistance to Voter Engagement Among Low Income Young Adults

Note: Everything described below emerged from the conversations held with opportunity youth by the National Council of Young Leaders.

A combination of misinformation, ignorance, and despair have aligned to persuade many young adults that “My vote doesn’t count,” “It won’t make a difference anyway,” and “I don’t want to vote for any of them... they’re all the same and nothing will change no matter who is elected.”

The deeply internalized feeling of powerlessness and despair that comes from being raised in poverty is an underlying factor that reinforces the belief that nothing will change and that there is no point in believing that our vote will make any difference.

Many young people are following in the footsteps of their parents or other role models. There is no strong counter-point to the presumption that neither voting nor elections make any difference. Worse still, there is sometimes very strong opposition to voting expressed by outspoken individuals who will actively oppose any of their peers who encourage voting as a means of change.

An additional factor is that most of the elected officials appear to come from very different backgrounds than low-income young people, especially young people of color, and are therefore assumed to have no concern for the issues affecting low-income communities of color. Many young people believe that very few candidates understand or highlight the issues of poverty. It seems that most national candidates believe that talking about poverty diminishes their appeal to the people most likely to vote. As a result, low-income young adults do not feel compelled to vote on the issues and platforms that candidates embrace.

There is much publicity about the corruption of elected officials and therefore an assumption that almost all officials are corrupt and subject only to the influence of money. Young people have directly or indirectly become aware of the ways that money increasingly flows from the wealthiest individuals and corporations to candidates, undermining the people's voice. Sadly, the result is that not only does the actual flow of money directly influence the outcomes of the elections, but the perception of how this money flows discourages voting among the poor and thus further affects the outcomes.

In addition, many young adults have experienced important promises having been made during elections that are not fulfilled once the candidate is in office. They hypothesize that either the candidate never meant it, or that it is impossible for anyone to make a difference no matter how hard they try, even if elected.

The prevalence of injustice perceived by young people in our communities and in society as a whole is a discouraging factor. Many believe the system is set up to sustain inequality and injustice, so that the wealthy and powerful may continue to benefit, and that nothing is going to change that. Even when they have not reached that conclusion, some young people simply feel inadequately prepared to vote wisely. The issues are complicated, the candidates are often similar, the information is confusing, the advertisements are unhelpful, and the potential voters do not know on what basis to choose.

So they don't choose and they don't vote. In each meeting that we held, at least a few members expressed this perspective.

There is also among young people a misperception of the impact of a criminal record. Many young adults believe that anyone with any type of criminal record cannot vote. They do not understand that these laws are made state by state and vary. A barrier identified is the research that potential young voters must do to determine their eligibility. Many do not know that there are ways of re-engaging with their electoral rights, such as having their criminal records expunged or moving from a state with harsh exclusionary laws to a state in which they can participate. Sadly, even if the person knows of different steps that he or she they can take to re-engage with the electoral process, many times the professional help required is missing to make it a reality.

Similarly, immigrant children born in this country sometimes do not understand that they are citizens and can vote.

The elimination of a civic education curriculum from many schools, especially within the schools of low-income communities, is seen as a cause of young people's under-preparation for voting. This is also seen as a symptom of a widespread and deliberate effort to leave young people ignorant of their rights and duties as citizens, unprepared to study the issues, and uninformed to vote intelligently.

Specific Solutions

Note: All solutions outlined below emerged from the conversations with opportunity youth. These solutions require very deliberate changes in existing institutions, or focused and active outreach campaigns to low-income young people. All demand an allocation of key resources and funding.

Note: Part Two of this paper is the integration of several of these solutions into an action campaign to be developed, led, and implemented by the National Council of Young Leaders through the Opportunity Youth United movement if funds become available.

1) Education

- a) Start early to educate children about the history, value, and impact of the right and responsibility to be informed and to vote regularly and thoughtfully at every level: federal, state, and local. Give them the details of how it works.
- b) Begin with Sesame Street and Big Bird, inculcating positive attitudes and expectations.
- c) Integrate civic education into school curricula starting at 6th grade and continuing through high school.
- d) Make sure job training and service programs designed for opportunity youth build in a civic engagement curriculum similar to the one that YouthBuild has prepared called the Blueprint for Democracy, and a voter registration practice.
- e) Change the rules governing AmeriCorps that prohibit voter registration as part of national service; teaching citizen responsibility should be inherent in all national service programs.

2) Messaging

- a) Let people know that the very powers they think are conspiring against them and have a stake in their remaining poor and powerless and willing to work in low-wage jobs, are delighted that they are choosing not to vote. If we voted in large numbers, the elected officials might have to respond to our policy priorities, and this could shift the balance of power.
- b) Make sure people have the facts about voting levels in different groups and communities, and the impact of these disparities. The simple fact that over 40 million fewer people voted in the mid-term election of 2010 than voted in 2008 brings a gasp of shock. The fact that only 32% of non-college bound youth vote compared to 62% of college youth is a wake-up call for young people who need to understand why their issues are ignored by the elected officials.

3) Media

- a) Get the public media to cover the issues and perspective of low-income people more fully and intelligently.

- b) Anyone who is running a campaign to reach the young people should use social media campaigns about the importance of voting, designed to speak to young people; this should include texting.
- c) Use community radio shows as an inexpensive tool to reach people in their communities.
- d) Develop a smart phone app about voting.

4) Celebrities

- a) Get the people most admired by the community to speak up about the importance of voting and about key issues and the impact on these issues of not voting.
- b) Engage celebrities at rallies and events designed to attract low income young voters.

5) In-Person Community Outreach

- a) Organize committees of those committed to voting to reach out to those who do not vote and are not registered.
- b) Develop peer group outreach teams.
- c) Educate and mobilize through churches.
- d) Reach out through all public places: street corners, community centers, community colleges.
- e) Create special events to attract young people, led by other young people, integrating these messages.
- f) Visit the schools and the programs involving low income young people.
- g) Persuade the school committees that civic education is important.

6) Pro-active Engagement with Candidates

- a) Make sure the candidates know what people in low-income communities and families want: show up, speak up, propose solutions, and demonstrate that we will vote.
- b) Understand that most candidates really don't understand our issues, have not experienced them, and need to be educated by us continuously over time.
- c) Make a determined effort to inform them and provide them with the agenda they should be espousing.
- d) Similarly, find allies with greater influence and wealth whom we can educate and who can speak on behalf of our issues, such as the corporate leaders who have joined the 100K Opportunities Initiative.
- e) Find the resources and inspiration for low-income people themselves to prepare and to run for elections at all levels, and be supported by the community.
- f) Engage and prepare subgroups of young people strategically around their chosen issues, making sure they show up whenever candidates are in public events.

7) Holding Elected Officials Accountable in an On-going Way

- a) Do not let the elected officials off the hook of what they promised after they are elected. Any active effort to get low-income young people to vote should stay organized and engaged. We should pull the elected back into our communities consistently; reach out to them consistently; educate them about our realities and make them into allies. They will never think of the solutions without our input.

8) Identifying and supporting our own Candidates

- a) Find the resources, spread the information and inspiration, for people from our backgrounds committed to our solutions to run for office themselves, with back-up and support. We have witnessed the success and influence that some of our peers have achieved in recent years – e.g. Johnny Rivera as District Leader in East Harlem, Luis Chavez as a member of the board of supervisors in Fresno, Nina Saxon as liaison for the Controller in New York, Jamiel Alexander on the board of advisors to the Mayor in York. Building a network of successful and aspiring candidates across the country would be valuable.

9) Making the system easier to navigate

- a) Fight for automatic and/or early registration, early voting, shorter lines at the polling places.
- b) Fight for ex-felons to regain the right to vote as soon as their incarceration is over.

A Broader Solution: Overall Empowerment

We find that the best way to motivate our peers is to invite them to imagine the world the way it ought to be. We ask them to think how they would change it if they had the power. When they conceptualize those changes, they get excited to realize that this vision is shared by others, and that with broad united action they might be able to exercise enough power to make a difference, to eliminate injustice and poverty and racism, to elect different leaders, to become leaders themselves. They need to belong to an organization, a program, a church, or a club just to have the conversation.

But to achieve their goals they need a movement in which they experience collective commitment and momentum toward specific and large goals, guided by positive principles and inspiring leaders with integrity and passion. They need to see large numbers of young people, backed by adults who either have influence or are willing to take risks for them, united toward real change. When this happens, and when they can choose, become, or vote for candidates who stand for their vision, they will vote.

We also believe that we need a united movement that includes young people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, both urban and rural, that can build a large constituency speaking with one voice about the issues of poverty and inequality of opportunity. The divisions that exist between poor whites and blacks and Latinos, immigrants and American-born residents, Native Americans and other minorities, urban and rural poor, tend to perpetuate our collective powerlessness and work against building the influence we need. The National Council of Young Leaders is a united body representing all these groups, serving as the coordinating body of Opportunity Youth United.

Opportunity Youth United exists to build a united and inspiring movement that will succeed at dramatically increasing opportunity and decreasing poverty in America. Voter engagement is a key element of this success.



Increasing Voter Engagement Among Low-Income Young Adults

Part Two: Civic Engagement Action Plan

Introduction:

We believe that it should be the responsibility of all elected officials in our democracy to represent the best interests of all their constituents, whether those constituents vote or not. Some groups of people have come relatively recently into the electorate, having been excluded or discouraged historically; some are still denied the right to vote; others are in a generation of young people raised in poverty who have never been encouraged or educated on civic engagement. While we will make it our business to invite, educate, and mobilize low-income young adults to vote and speak up, we also believe it is the responsibility of political leaders to reach out and seek to know the issues that affect all populations. In addition, because some people are still denied the right to vote, we will communicate that while voting is extremely important, it is not the only way to be heard and we must use all means. We will also invite those who are too young to vote to use their voices and prepare to become informed contributing citizens.

Below is our outline of a range of actions focused on increasing voting among low-income youth, which we will prioritize and implement dependent on the availability of resources.

Phase 1 – Empower those in our existing networks, sponsoring organizations, and Community Action Teams to be more civically engaged.

- I) **Voter Registration:** Launch a registration campaign through all our sponsoring organizations and Community Action Teams, providing and empowering the youth currently served with the tools and information needed to register. Best practice is to let them fill it out in person and if we could absorb the cost, mail it ourselves. Alternatively if time and equipment is an issue many states allow for registration online and we can provide the links to on-line information and registration.

- II) **Voter Education:** Generate local discussion, possibly using the Blueprint for Democracy curriculum prepared by YouthBuild USA to uplift the issues most important to the young people in each local program. Provide them with an unbiased summary sheet regarding the current presidential candidates and what policies they are for and against based on their platforms and their voting records. This will empower youth and create a shift from a lack of knowledge and understanding that perpetuates ignorance of the privilege and responsibility of voting to knowledge and acknowledgment of the real responsibility in making informed decisions about choosing whether or not to vote.

A) **Find or develop appropriate nonpartisan guides** that include factual information regarding candidates' stances on key issues.

- i) One option identified: A survey on issues that aligns with presidential candidates' positions that any person could use: <http://www.isidewith.com/political-quiz>.
- ii) Develop our own guide based on the issues in the *Recommendations* and the platforms and previous voting records of the candidates.
- iii) Seek other organizations' guides focused on issues affecting low-income communities.
- iv) Train our own community leaders about the importance of being nonpartisan and how to hold that line.

B) **Interact directly with the candidates** to elicit their answers to our questions on key issues:

- i) Through written requests, ask candidates to respond to a set of questions that we provide and share their answers.
- ii) Hold Forums, especially when dealing with local candidates, in which young people question them directly through panels on the key issues and then publicize their responses.
- iii) Train our community leaders in how to build real relationships with elected officials and their staff, creating ongoing communication and access.

C) **Test out the Text, Talk, Vote System** for widespread use. This platform allows young people to engage in a conversation via text about their attitudes towards the political process, information about the candidates, including videos of debates, and lastly they are provided information on how, when, and where to vote.

- III) **Voter Mobilization:** Mobilize registered voters to turn out to vote. This is a pro-active process that will involve several levels of work:
- i) Mobilize all our sponsoring organizations to pro-actively encourage all their members and graduates to vote, providing information about when and where.
 - ii) Mobilize all our Community Action Teams to do the same, reaching out actively not only to members but to all young people and others in their local communities.
 - iii) Research and work with non-partisan voter mobilization initiatives occurring in our chosen communities.

Phase 2: Reach Beyond our Existing Networks

I) In-Person Community Outreach

A) Mobilize sponsoring organizations to reach beyond their membership to make voter registration and education a priority for young people in their communities outside their own direct membership. Create sub groups and committees as needed for a more focused effort for those that are committed and have the time.

- i. Develop peer group outreach teams.

B) Reach out through all public places: street corners, community centers, job centers, community colleges.

- i. Create special events and one stop shops led by young people for voter registration and voter information within public places and pre-established events.
 - a. Examples of pre-established events: future job fairs sponsored by the 100K Opportunity Initiative, local high school and college ballgames, community arts events, any event led by organizations serving young people.
 - b. Example of special events organized by us: the Boston CAT State House *Youth Voice, Youth Vote* event in which voter registration was included.
 - ii. Partner with local community college student-led organizations.
 - iii. Build voter registration into local workforce Investment agencies (WIBs) and one-stop centers.
 - iv. Build relationships with the leaders of youth-serving organizations; through them reach the young people for events, workshops, registration, and mobilization.
 - v. Reach out to the hot spots where young people who may not be connected to organizations hang out.
 - vi. Negotiate with school districts for access to the “non-traditional” youth, the “transitional” students working for their high school equivalencies, or in special schools.
 - vii. Work with other organizations that are collecting and disseminating the facts about voting rights for ex-offenders in various states and share that information widely.
 - viii. Deliberately seek the people who are on parole, on electronic monitoring, and negotiate for access to contacting them, to inform them of their rights and the process of voting.
 - ix. In rural areas where community centers and community colleges are less prevalent we might do door-to-door outreach in more populated neighborhoods.
 - x. Meet with local managers of retail businesses and ask if we could leave a free stack of pamphlets at the sales counter for distribution to the public.
 - xi. Discuss with local newspapers the possibility of including fliers encouraging readers to vote, and a simple voting registration form within the contents of the extra newspaper sales content. (This is more feasible in smaller rural areas.)
- C) **Visit the schools and the programs** involving low income young people. Offer voter registration for those who have reached the eligible age. (*Some states allow for registration when you’re 17 if you would turn 18 before the election as you have to be registered a number of days or weeks before an election to vote.)

Phase 3: Impact Broader Public Perception

- I) **Leadership Engagement:** Get the people most admired by the community to speak up about the importance of voting and of speaking up about key issues and the impact of these issues on our families and community.
 - A) Meet with and partner with celebrities and other organizations or sports teams of notoriety both nationally and locally.
 - B) Engage celebrities at rallies and events designed to attract low income young voters. Be sure to vet the celebrities for positive messaging.
 - C) Explore the role of churches and church leadership in voter engagement

II) Social Media Engagement:

- A) Hold contests for effective video communications made by young people about the reasons for voting, for standing up, for speaking up and spread the results in a dynamic campaign.
- B) As we build out our membership, steadily distribute dynamic videos and other messages focused on the electoral process, spotlighting youth engagement and effectiveness, candidates' responses, calls to action.
- C) Create an interactive website for young people to express their views, so that when candidates learn that they should be seeking to know what Opportunity Youth are thinking, they will come to that website.

Phase 4: Engage with Candidates Pro-actively

- I) Have our CATS, student groups and various leadership teams meet with elected officials and prospective candidates to**
 - a. Make sure the candidates know what people in low-income communities and families want: show up, speak up, propose solutions, and demonstrate that we will vote. Understand that most candidates really don't understand our issues, have not experienced them, and need to be educated by us continuously over time.
 - b. Make a determined effort to inform them and provide them with the agenda they should be espousing.
- II) Find allies with greater influence and wealth whom we can educate who can speak on behalf of our issues, such as the corporate leaders who have joined the 100K Opportunities Initiative.**
- III) Engage and prepare subgroups of young people strategically around their chosen issues, making sure they show up whenever candidates are in public events.**

Phase 5: Hold Elected Officials Accountable in an On-going Way

- I) Continually meet with elected officials after the election during their term,** ensuring that they keep us and the people we represent close to mind. Our active efforts to get low-income young people to vote should stay organized and engaged. Any real change takes time and unity is needed to show the full urgency of our cause. We will pull the elected officials back into our communities consistently; reach out to them consistently; educate them about our realities and develop them as allies. They will never think of lasting solutions without our input.

Phase 6: Longer Term Changes Affecting Civic Engagement

- I) Increase Civic Engagement Education:** Meet with school committees and school boards and existing youth councils that advise school boards, persuading them of the importance of civic education, promoting the idea that current political news and issues would be more beneficial to young people than just a historical point of view, especially for increasing and instilling the importance and effectiveness of voting. Make sure schools actually teach the

facts about the structure of government, the ways decisions and investments are made at each level of government, and the role of citizens in preserving our democracy.

II) Go Local: While the presidential campaigns always command attention, for the long term it is essential to bring people's attention and awareness to the local campaigns that affect them most directly, and to the profound importance of voter turnout in off-year elections. We will bring the issues home to the neighborhood, to the block, as they affect the local schools, jails, jobs, housing, police, water, food, and environment.

In Closing:

The fact that youth voter engagement among 18 and 19 year olds dropped from 51% in 2008 to just 21% in 2010 creates a profound challenge for our society and reflects a widespread lack of education, communication, and mobilization. The levels for low-income youth were undoubtedly even lower, in both years.

As the only national leadership group of opportunity youth from diverse backgrounds, we aim to correct this weakness in our democracy to the best of our ability dependent on resources available.

Opportunity Youth United

OYUnited.org

